

8: Salvation History

Introduction: History and Faith

Christianity is an historical faith. Our faith is rooted in history—past, present and future. Unlike eastern mystical religions that offer an escape from this world and absorption into the divine or the cosmos, Christianity deals with life and creation—then, now and to come. The Danish Protestant teacher, Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), sought on the other hand “to reduce the dependence of Christianity on history to a minimum” albeit grounded in the reality of the life and death of Christ on earth and the response of his first disciples, and as a model which would “set the modern believer on the track of the self-revelation which God would give in response to faith.”¹ Certainly, the apostles identified themselves as witnesses of events that have actually happened (cf. John 21:25). Later, however, such Protestants as Karl Barth (1886-1968) went further by insisting that in seeking “to grasp the true meaning of the text of the New Testament, the historian could only write footnotes to the insights of faith.”² Orthodoxy, while insisting on believing in the truth of Christian dogma, always relates that dogma in Tradition to a living reality, deeply grounded in history. Faith does not, therefore, dispense either with history or rationality.

As the Roman Catholic theologian, Father Adrian Hastings, has pointed out: “History is basic to Christian belief and self-understanding. The evocation of remembered events and an interest in historical method have been characteristic of Christian life in almost all periods. Like so much in Christianity, this began in part as an inheritance from Judaism.”³ Thus the opening sentence of this lecture—“Christianity is an historical faith”—is also an affirmation of the unity of Judaism and Christianity in fulfilling God’s plan for humanity:

The long march from Adam and Abraham via Moses, David, and the exile to the Second Temple Judaism was incorporated within the Christian memory and remained paradigmatic for further historical understanding, but a wholly new dimension was provided by belief that the historical life and death of Jesus, while fulfilling the meaning in that long march, inaugurated a new age. It would be centuries before the usage of chronicling history in terms of AD (the years of the Lord, beginning with

¹ John Kent, “History,” in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, edited by Alan Richardson and John Bowden, 259. London: SCM Press, 1983.

² Kent, 259.

³ Adrian Hastings, “History,” in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, edited by Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason and Hugh Pyper, 299-302. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

the birth of Jesus) and, still later, BC (before Christ), was invented, but this decisive reshaping of history in terms of Jesus was implicit in Christian belief from the start.⁴

However, despite the importance of history in both Jewish and Christian self-understanding and belief, “history cannot decide what is theologically true, [that is God’s actions within history, although] it can do much to tell us what cannot be true, what is merely bad dogma, deriving from past failings of understanding.”⁵ Furthermore, throughout both the Old and New Testaments the relationship between general history and Christian history is often unclear, with certain notable exceptions such as the firm links between Roman and Christian history in the Gospel of St. Luke and its continuation in the book of Acts.⁶ In brief, human history in itself does not provide a full picture of God’s plan for humanity without theology serving to interpret that history in the light of revelation.

Father Adrian Hastings concludes the entry on “history” in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* with the claim that: “Effectively the historical dimension in theology seems to depend on the strength of its eschatology.”⁷ In other words, he insists that our understanding of the relationship of faith to history is intimately linked to how much importance we attach to death, divine judgment and life after death. Furthermore, in writing on “salvation” Father Hastings reflects: “While in the gospels the stress [on salvation] is more on the present, something already real for those who believe in Jesus, as time passes the sense of salvation undoubtedly shifts towards the future, the destiny of the faithful after death, and this next-worldly dimension came to dominate more and more.”⁸ Initially, this understanding of salvation, even with the emphasis upon the “next-worldly dimension,” was committed to the understanding that no one could be saved outside the Church; however, many Christian groups now hold a more universalist understanding of salvation in which anyone might be saved whether or not they believe in Christ; and this confusion has now reached a point where “few words proper to Christianity’s core vocabulary have at present a less defined meaning.”⁹ In other words, the idea of salvation has become a much disputed theological concept among Christians with different understandings of Christ’s saving work. Therefore, it is important to understand the Orthodox perspective on salvation, as outlined in the previous lecture, especially in the context of becoming “children of

⁴ Hastings, 300.

⁵ Hastings, 301.

⁶ See Hastings, 300.

⁷ Hastings, 301.

⁸ Hastings, “Salvation,” 640 in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*.

⁹ Hastings, “Salvation,” 640.

God" in this world. For the Orthodox Church and Orthodox Christians, salvation involves a striving for deification in this world now and has more than merely a "next-worldly dimension."

Salvation History: The Biblical Foundations of the Orthodox Dogma of Salvation in Christ

The historical perspective sketched above is an important supplement to the personal perspective on salvation set out in the previous lecture. Both the personal and the historical perspectives are deeply rooted in a commitment to human freedom. The root meaning in Arabic of the Hebrew word for salvation (*yāsha'*) is " 'make wide' or 'make sufficient'; this root is in contrast to [the Arabic root word] *sārar* 'narrow,' which means 'be restricted' or 'cause distress.' That which is wide connotes freedom from distress and the ability to pursue one's own objectives."¹⁰ In a similar manner, the closely linked theme of redemption is from the Hebrew word *gaal* meaning "to free,"¹¹ used in Patristic writing "to convey the vast scheme and many methods of how God called the world back to grace."¹² Salvation history has been defined as "the pattern of events in human history that reveal God's saving plan;"¹³ however, it is also necessary to remember that saving plan is applicable to the whole of the Cosmos and to the life of every person. As Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky has reminded us, the preaching of the Apostles is clear—"the salvation of mankind as a whole . . . has already been accomplished;" however, "another truth [remains]—the necessity for a personal reception and assimilation of the gift of salvation on the part of each of the faithful, and the fact that this latter salvation depends upon each one himself."¹⁴

In seeking to grasp the full meaning of the Orthodox understanding of the dogma of salvation in Christ, Protopresbyter Michael is a reliable guide:

The Lord Jesus Christ is the Redeemer and Saviour of the human race. All the preceding history of mankind up to the Incarnation of the Son of God, in the clear image given both in the Old Testament and the New Testament Scriptures, is a *preparation* for the coming of the Saviour. All the following history of mankind, after the Resurrection and Ascension of the Lord, is the *actualization* of the salvation which had been accomplished: the reception and assimilation of it by the faithful.

¹⁰ R. Laird Harris (Editor), *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1, p. 414 for the Hebrew word *yāsha'* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980).

¹¹ Robert Young, *Young's Analytical Concordance to the Bible*, 799 for the word *redeem* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1982).

¹² John Anthony McGuckin, entry for "Soteriology" in *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 315-316.

¹³ Alice L. Camille, "What does salvation history mean?" at: www.vocationnetwork.org/ask_alice/90.

¹⁴ Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: A Concise Exposition*, Translated and edited by Hieromonk Saraphim Rose and the St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, Third Edition (Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2005), 198.

The *culmination* of the great work of salvation is bound up with the end of the world.
The Cross and the Resurrection of Christ stand at the very centre of human history.¹⁵

In seeking to understand the preparation required for the coming of Christ, the actualisation of salvation by the faithful and the Second Coming of Christ, a Biblical perspective is essential. Rather than interrupt the Biblical narrative with numerous references, consider the broad sweep of the unity of salvation history.

The Biblical Narrative

Although righteous persons existed in pre-history of which Noah is perhaps the most striking example, arguably, this sense of God active in history first emerges with Abraham. He is our father in the faith. The Patriarch Abraham's faith—his obedience to the promise of God—formed the basis for his righteous and blessed life. As with Noah before him, God instituted a covenant—a relational agreement between Abraham, his numberless descendants and the God who called him from the Ur of the Chaldees.

Thereafter, God continued to develop His relationship with His chosen people through a succession of divine acts and covenants. The Exodus led to the Mosaic Covenant and the Law—the Torah. The settlement in the Promised Land led to the covenant with David and his house. The apostasy of the people was met with the thundering reform movement of the Prophets whom God called and used to set forth His Word afresh amongst His people. Although Israel might be chastised by exile into Babylon, yet the prophet Ezekiel prophesied a new covenant whereby the Law of God would be inscribed in peoples' hearts rather than on blocks of stone. To this end, the Jews awaited the promised Messiah, the one who would set Israel free, free to worship and serve the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob with undefiled lips, hearts and lives.

When the Messiah finally came, it was to fulfil the promise of God in the Law, the Prophets and the Writings, (Wisdom)—to fulfil, yes, but also to extend and deepen. Jesus Christ deepened the Law in the manner the Prophet Ezekiel had prophesied by humanising the letter to the Spirit, by calling all to repentance and faith as the means by which the Law could rightly be upheld; in other words by sacrificial love of God and Man. He extended the Law by the grace of a Love that reached out to all, Jew and Gentile alike, who would embrace that Love as It embraced them. This Love died and rose again to open up the new life of God to all.

¹⁵ Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: A Concise Exposition*, 197 [Emphasis in original].

Thus was the Kingdom of God born on earth in the shared lives of a new community called and empowered by the Holy Spirit both from Israel and beyond her boundaries—the Church. (Indeed the word "ecclesia" means, "called out" and has a Semitic root in *qahal* or "assembly"). This "Church" gave final and concrete expression to God's purpose from the foundation of the world. This "Church" embraced the whole of creation, life and humanity in space and time. Nothing and no one fell out of her embrace. Indeed her final triumph could only be manifest in the Last Times, the eschaton, when God would be "all in all." This sense of an impending end in the grand design of the Love of God drove the gospel of Christ outward to reach and convert the whole known world. God was gathering into his *Qahal*—his Ecclesia, His Church, the whole Universe—past, present and future.

This faith in the ingathering saving power of God was and is energised in the Church's Liturgy which being the manifestation of the New Covenant in Christ's Body and Blood effected what it signified. By the power of the Holy Spirit the Eucharist built and extended the Church. We see this in one of the Church's most ancient recorded Liturgies, the Didache, an ancient Eucharistic rite written for the pagan converts of the communities of Antioch. It uses the typology of the feeding of the 5,000 to make its point: "Just as the bread broken was first scattered on the hills, then was gathered and became one, so let your Church be gathered from the ends of the earth into your Kingdom, for yours is the glory and power through all ages."¹⁶

These magnificent themes reinforce two essential Christian convictions: first, that God works through and within the historical process to save and re-create; and second, that the people of God are an identifiable in-gathered community for that purpose. Thus God working in history—"salvation history"—is the characteristic mark of every aspect of our faith. The Church's task, therefore, is both to preach and present what God has done, what God is doing and what God will do to save and re-create. The Church, being the *Qahal*, the Ecclesia—stretching back to the dawn of time, therefore includes all the righteous as saints, both before and after the coming of the Messiah. So, in the Orthodox Church, the patriarchs, prophets, kings and righteous ones of the former covenants are all gloriously commemorated in our Calendar. They also partake of Christ. As Jesus Himself said to his fellow Jews: "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad." The Jews said to him, "You are not yet 50 years old, and you have seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." (John

¹⁶ *The Didache [The Teaching of the Lord to the Gentiles by the Twelve Apostles]* translated by Robert A. Taft, II. C. 9.4 in *The Apostolic Fathers*, edited by Jack N. Sparks (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life, 1978), 314.

8:56-58). Christ made a similar point to the Samaritan woman in stressing that "salvation is from the Jews." (John 4:22).

The People of God as Church before and after the Incarnation

The Orthodox Church includes all the salvation history of the Jews, because this was the Church before Christ. Therefore, unlike the West, we do not say that the Church was born at Pentecost. The Church was born in the Garden of Eden! We recall that St. Irenaeus represented the Fathers generally by saying that in Christ, the whole of Creation has been recapitulated, ingathered made into the Qahal or Ecclesia of a new humanity which itself prefigures and actualises a new creation. "He, as the eternal King, recapitulates all things in himself" ¹⁷

In contrast to this Orthodox understanding the post-Schism churches of the West seem to accept the Old Testament on an equal footing with the New *as text*, but they also appear to mark too great a contrast between the People of God before and after the coming of Christ. For this reason, the churches of the West tend to neglect the standing of the Old Testament righteous as saints in their own right and this is reflected by their omission from the Calendar. It may even be reflected in the shadow of anti-Semitism that has also, sadly, affected those parts of the Orthodox Church that have been unduly influenced by western misconceptions of salvation as between the Old and New Covenants. Father John McGuckin is right to remind us of the need for "deep mutual respect" among Jews and Christians, that "the Jewish people were once the foundation of the Covenant mystery, and that they still remain invested within it;" therefore, "those Orthodox, or other, Christians who regard the Jewish people and their faith as utterly alien to the Church are very misguided."¹⁸ It might also be added that those Jews who look upon the Orthodox Church as a continuing promoter of pogroms and virulent anti-Semitism are (hopefully) equally misguided.

St. Paul as both a Messianic Jew and a servant of Christ, totally committed as he was to the Gentile mission, certainly saw the Church as the "Israel of God." (Galatians 6:16). The only discontinuity in his mind between the Old and New Covenants resided in the inability of the Law to save us. In Galatians 4:1-2 St. Paul developed an interesting assessment of the purpose of the Law that would appeal to both Jew and Gentile alike without conceding anything of the new insights and life of the Gospel: " ...the heir, as long as he is a child, is no better than a slave, though he is the owner of all the estate; but he is under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father." The guardianship of the Law has now yielded to the maturity of grace and freedom

¹⁷ Adversus Haereses, III, 21, 9.

¹⁸ John Anthony McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 428.

in Christ—freedom that is to be slaves of the truth of God’s death-defeating Love. This is a continuing theme in the Epistles of St. Paul: “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Corinthians 3:17), as set out by Christos Yannaras in *The Freedom of Morality* with its focus on each human life as an “adventure of freedom.”¹⁹

If salvation history cannot neglect the purpose of God in the old covenant and its relationship to the new, neither can it ignore the position of the Jews then and since who have rejected Christ. Here we must concur with St. Paul that the Jews still have the Mosaic covenant; and they are still God’s People. To this day they live in a different pasture, nonetheless loved by God. They have not entered into the promise of Christ, but one day we pray that they will. St. Paul believed that they would when all the Gentiles had been gathered in (Romans 11:25-26). Much profit may be derived by studying the whole of St. Paul’s counsel on this matter in Romans Chapters 11 to 16.

The Orthodox Perspective on Islam and the Religions of the East

There is, of course, one other historical religion of the Semitic type, and that is Islam. Muslims have accepted Christ, but only as prophet, not as the Son of God. Nonetheless, Islam also believes that God is the God of history, of revelation, of mighty deeds, of covenants and laws. Interestingly, St. John of Damascus who lived at the time of the initial expansion of Islam, and indeed served for some time as a civil servant in the court of the caliph of Damascus, referred to Muslims as “Ishmaelites.” He seemed to take the view that Islam, (at least in his time), was a well-developed and autonomous heresy of both Christianity and Judaism from which it consciously borrowed.²⁰

Islam is a faith grounded in wisdom and law. The stream of salvation history does not touch it for one essential reason: salvation is not usually an issue for those who believe in Allah. According to Islamic doctrine as set forth in the Quran, Islam teaches that Allah made the perfect and final revelation to the prophet Muhammad, and that Paradise awaits those who live the Law of God, while hell awaits infidels and idolaters. Occasionally, Islam has drifted closer to Christianity, especially when it has both considered and appreciated the humanities, especially historical development within human culture and the liberal arts. Islam has also inched closer to Christ in the experience of its own Sufi mystics who have variously claimed to have experienced

¹⁹ Christos Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, Translated from the Greek by Elizabeth Briere (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984). The citation from St. Paul and the stress of Yannaras on “the adventure of freedom” is drawn from the Foreword by Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia, 11-12.

²⁰ John Anthony McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church*, 428.

a direct, personal, intimate and unitive relationship with Allah. We can only pray that such mystical traditions strengthen in Islam so as to offer some common ground for dialogue between us. When and if this happens, Christ will be recognised for who He actually is.

The religions of the East—Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism and Buddhism—offer an interesting opportunity for evangelism to the Orthodox Church. On the one hand, dialogue is difficult because these are not essentially historical religions, nor are some of them (i.e. Buddhism) theistic. On the other hand, Orthodoxy stands close in many respects to these traditions because the Orthodox Church has never rejected or marginalised its mystical or sacramental theologies, which see both the human and material worlds as vehicles for the deifying energies of God. The circular nature of these religions' anthropology and salvation doctrine is, of course, an issue for us. Christianity can never tolerate the transmigration of souls, reincarnation and mystical absorption into the Infinite. We insist on the radical transcendence of a personal God who is beyond every created thing. Nonetheless, we have grounds for hope that if these faiths can find in our faith some resonance of their concern for the freedom and deification of human life, they also might be encouraged to join the great stream of salvation history. Orthodoxy stands well placed to do this important missionary work. Evelyn Underhill, however, strikes a necessary cautionary note as to these prospects:-

Surely the real difference which marks out Christianity from all other religions lies just here; in [the] robust acceptance of humanity in its wholeness, and of life in its completeness, as something which is susceptible of the Divine. It demands and deals with, the whole man, his Titanic energies and warring instincts; not, as did the ancient mysteries, separating and cultivating some supposed transcendental principle in him, to the exclusion of all else. Christians believe in a God immanent and incarnate, Who transfuses the whole of life which He has created and calls that life in its wholeness to union with Him.²¹

Underhill's characteristic wise insights set the scene for a dialogue that truly recognises the differences in the understanding of the human person and God as between Christianity and the religions of the east. This recognition can only help to deepen such dialogue and enrich the interaction. These are worthy principles that should inform any interfaith dialogue. Orthodox Christianity has the necessary flexibility to adapt its metaphysical and linguistic expression to seek convergence in truth without sacrificing the gospel.

²¹ Evelyn Underhill, *Essentials of Mysticism and Other Essays [1920]*, p. 105 (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing 2003)

Conclusion: Uniting Salvation History, Personal Salvation and the Universe

The scope of our salvation in Christ within the historical process must always lead us beyond parochialism to the "bigger picture." However, there can be a global parochialism as well as a local parochialism. The possibility and indeed the likelihood of life being ubiquitous in a Cosmos of probably over 1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 stars strongly challenges any notion of terracentric exceptionalism. Most Christians, strangely prefer not to look at this issue. It is certainly true that we must suspend judgement on "preaching the gospel to aliens" until we have some hard and fast evidence of intelligent life rather than, say, non-sentient microbial life elsewhere in the vastness of space. Nonetheless, it is a somewhat myopic theology that digs its head in the sand and does not want to consider the position and calling of humanity in the wider context of the universe itself.

Salvation history will be carried with us as we journey beyond this planet. What significance will our experience and faith have out there? What shall we say when the "person" who questions us concerning our religious beliefs is not human? Has Christ come just for us or for them as well? Does God have a design not just for this planet earth but for the whole of creation as well? What we may be sure of is that however far the bread is scattered across the universe, the returning baskets will be full! Alice Meynell's poem, "Christ of the Universe"²² is instructive:

O, be prepared, my soul!
To read the inconceivable, to scan
The myriad forms of God those stars unroll
When, in our turn, we show to them a Man.

For the present, in unifying a personal and an historical perspective of salvation, it is right to remember that "what unites all Orthodox thinking about salvation is the total focus on Jesus Christ" who is "the foundation of all history ("by whom all things were made"), the centre of creation, and the image of God (Hebrews 1:3; Colossians 1:15), according to whose image we are made."²³ There is then considerable strength in the summary of the life of a saint as given by Archimandrite Vasileios: "Because God loves us, He allows us to undergo many trials in our lives. . . . Throughout our lives and through all our hardships we are being prepared to give this one

²² <http://www.bartleby.com/236/265.html>

²³ Peter Bouteneff, "Christ and Salvation," 96 in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008). The quotation is taken from the Nicene Creed.

testimony, that Christ is risen from the dead; and this is how Orthodox theology goes on”²⁴—thereby providing the foundation for both personal salvation and salvation history.

This focus on Christ who comes “to ailing human nature . . . as a physician with three medicines: bread, wine and chrism” has been beautifully captured in a hymn by St. Ephrem the Syrian (c. 306-373) about the unity of salvation and our reception of the Eucharist:

His body was newly mixed with our bodies,/ and His pure blood has been poured into our veins,/ and His brightness into our eyes./ All of Him has been mixed into all of us by His compassion,/ and since He loves His church very much,/ . . . He had living bread for her to eat,/ Wheat, the olive and grapes, created for our use—/the three of them serve You symbolically in three ways./ With three medicines You healed our disease./ Humankind had become weak and sorrowful and was failing./ You strengthened her with Your blessed bread,/ and You consoled her with Your sober wine,/ and You made her joyful with Your holy chrism. . . ./ The old and new [frauds] I deny, my Lord;/ by the Old and New [Testaments] that I have believed/ I have taken the measure of my hymns. ²⁵

Such is the fullness of the Orthodox doctrine of salvation embedded in the Eucharist and the living out of the Old and New Testaments—for the individual Orthodox Christian, for all mankind, for the earth and for the universe. This four-fold theological understanding of the Orthodox doctrine of salvation empowers each of us, in the words of St. Paul, in Ephesians to:

have boldness and confident access through faith in [Christ] . . . to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3: 12, 16-19).

The new-found fullness of our understanding of the Orthodox doctrine of salvation offers each of us an awesome personal possibility of living out our own salvation in Christ with “all the fullness

²⁴ Archimandrite Vasileios, *The Saint: Archetype of Orthodoxy*, 43, 45. The incorrect word “life” has been changed to “lives” to agree with the syntax of other words in the sentence.

²⁵ St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns*, Translated and Introduced by Kathleen E. McVey, Hymn 37, 424-427 (New York: Paulist Press, 1989).

of God" that is within the universe and within each of us, guiding us through the remaining years of our lives, no matter how long or short those years may be.

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